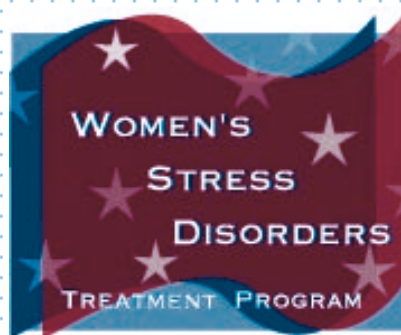


Regulating Emotions

How to feel more in
control of your feelings



Women's Stress Disorders Treatment Program

William S. Middleton VA Hospital
2500 Overlook Terrace
Madison, WI 53705
608-280-7084

***You might have
trouble regulating
your emotions if you:***

- ◆ Often feel overwhelmed by your feelings
- ◆ Are afraid of expressing your emotions
- ◆ Deny that you ever feel sad, angry, or hurt
- ◆ Feel overwhelmed by anger at times, but do not know why
- ◆ Feel out-of-control often
- ◆ Cannot figure out why you feel how you feel
- ◆ Use alcohol or drugs to numb your emotions



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***What are some reason why
I might have trouble
regulating my emotions?***

- You may have been repeatedly told when you were younger that your feelings did not matter
- You may have been shown that your feelings do not matter by the way you were treated (e.g., abused, neglected)
- You may not have ever learned how to soothe yourself (make yourself feel better when you are feeling bad)
- You may have rarely or never had your feelings validated (being reassured that they are ok) by others
- You may have relied on alcohol or drugs for so long that you do not know any other way to manage your feelings



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So, what can I do about this?

First, it might help to learn how to identify your feelings. Some people are so out of touch with their emotions that they do not even know how they are feeling. One way to know is to “check in” with yourself.



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Checking In

1. Stop what you are doing.
 2. Sit quietly for a few moments and taking a few deep breaths.
 3. Focus on how your body feels. (Do you feel tension anywhere? Are you holding your breath?)
- ➔ Notice any emotions you are feeling (sad, anxious, happy, scared, angry, lonely, amused?)
 - ➔ Notice whether your thoughts are racing.
 - ➔ You are feeling overwhelmed with feelings, try using a relaxation technique to calm down, then check in again.



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A few notes about feelings:

- Feelings communicate important messages to you about your current situation. You may choose to pay attention to the message that is being sent.
- Feelings are valid in their own right. You may want to consider that your feelings are always OK, because you cannot choose how you feel
- What you CAN choose is how you behave in reaction to your feelings.



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Now that I know how I am feeling, what do I do?

- Now, it is time to decide whether you want to do something in response to how you are feeling.
- If your feeling is a good one, you may want to continue what you are doing so that you can keep feeling good (as long as it is not harmful to you or someone else).
- If you are feeling bad, you may want to try to change the situation. For example, you may want to communicate your needs to someone in an assertive (not passive or aggressive) manner.
- You may want to sit with your feelings for a while, even if they feel bad, because this may help you work through whatever made you feel this way.
- If you feel bad, you may want to get support from a friend, family member, or therapist.



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Expressing your emotions

- You can express your emotions in many ways. Some of these ways include:
- Facial expression
- Body language
- Talking (and your tone of voice)
- Acting/behaving/doing something



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A note about expressing your emotions

It is important to make sure that you are expressing your emotions in the way that you mean to. Many people who have trouble regulating their emotions are misread or misunderstood by others, because they do not express their emotions in the same way that most people do. If you smile when you are sad, people will likely misinterpret your feelings. If you are sad, you may want to make sure that your face, body language, tone of voice, and behavior actually reflect this. If you are not sure how to do this, watch a TV show or a movie, or family or friends to see how people behave when they are sad, angry, happy, etc.



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What happens if I do not express my emotions?

- ➔ You may end up “stuffing” your emotions, which can lead to those feelings of being out-of-control or overwhelmed by them later.
- ➔ You may have the experience of letting anger or sadness build up, like a rain gutter, until it bursts, and comes pouring out.
- ➔ The idea is to express your emotions when they happen, a little at a time, so that they do not become overwhelming for you or those around you.



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This seems hard, what if I need help?

- ◆ If you would like help with learning to regulate your emotions, you may want to look into psychotherapy.
- ◆ You can try working on this with the help of a workbook such as: *The PTSD Workbook: Simple, effective techniques for overcoming traumatic stress symptoms* (Williams & Poijula, 2002)
- ◆ You can work on emotion regulation in individual or group therapy. One popular program, *Dialectical Behavior Therapy* (Linehan, 1992) combines the two.
- ◆ You may be eligible for therapy in the Women's Stress Disorders Treatment Program (WSDTP) at the Madison VA Hospital (608-280-7084).



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